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Facebook turns off automatic facial recognition feature for all European users in victory for privacy campaigners

- Decision taken following probe by the Irish Data Protection Commission
- Campaigners had warned against personal biometric information being given to the company without the permission of those pictured

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Facebook has turned off its controversial tag suggestions feature for users in Europe, in a move that campaigners will hail as a victory for privacy.

The social network tool took biometric information provided when users tag friends' faces in photos to make suggestions on the correct tags for future images.

But the company was heavily criticised when it introduced the feature and automatically opted-in all users in Europe last June without formally announcing its arrival on the site.

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Backtrack: Facebook has been forced to turn off its automatic tag suggestions feature that used facial recognition technology to recognise the faces of people pictured in photos uploaded to the site

Privacy campaigners were particularly disturbed since Facebook allows photographs to be published on its site without the express permission - or even knowledge - of those pictured.

With the facial-recognition feature activated on the site, this meant in essence that those uploading photos were handing the personal biometric information of those photographed over to the company.

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The removal of the feature and the forced deletion of all the biometric data will be a blow to the company which is under intense pressure to find new ways to convert its vast hoard users' personal information into cash since it was floated on the stock market earlier this year.

Responding to the removal of the feature, Nick Pickles, director of privacy campaign group Big Brother Watch, said: 'Users need to be in control of what happens to their data and it's absolutely right this applies to people's pictures on Facebook in the same way as their written personal information.'

'The wider issue is not just about people opting-in to use the technology, but how you regulate something when often the person in the photo might not be aware their photo has even been uploaded.'

'Facial recognition has the potential to undermine people's privacy far more dramatically than most existing technology, with ever more creative uses finding ways to track us and target us.'

Facebook was forced to carry out a review of the controversial feature's introduction after a wave of anger about potential data protection issues.

It announced last month that it would suspend the feature across Europe and erase all the biometric facial-recognition data it has collected thus far from users on the continent by October 15.

The move followed a review by Facebook Ireland of the degree to which the social networking site had implemented recommendations made in an audit of the social networking site by the Irish Data Protection Commission last December.

That report assessed Facebook Ireland's compliance with Irish Data Protection law and by extension EU law. The aim is to re-introduce the tag feature in the future, but with new guidelines and different forms of notice and consent.

Billy Hawkes, the Data Protection Commissioner for Ireland, said last month the tool would only return to the site if Facebook agreed with the department on the 'most appropriate means of collecting user consent'.

He praised the multi-billion pound company for 'sending a clear signal of its wish to demonstrate its commitment to best practice in data protection compliance.'

Mr Hawkes says Facebook should make users more aware of what happens to their personal data to increase control over privacy settings.

Mr Pickles added: 'It may be possible in future to find a way to use facial recognition on Facebook in very limited circumstances.

'However, given the challenge of securing consent from both the person uploading the photo and the people in the photo being scanned, it may be practically impossible to secure an adequate level of consent.

'What must not happen is the consent requirement be watered down because

Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook CEO: The decision will be a blow to the company which is under pressure to find new ways to rake in more money

GOOGLE ORDERED TO FIX PRIVACY POLICY 'WITHIN MONTHS'

European regulators have ordered Google to clarify its new privacy policy and make it easier for users to opt out of it.

France's National Commission on Computing and Freedom led a European investigation into Google's new unified policy, which replaced 60 individual policies for its search, email and other services and regulates how it uses the personal data it collects.

CNIL's president Isabelle Falque-Pierrotin said the company had 'three or four months' to make the revisions, otherwise 'authorities in several countries can take action against Google'.

Google responded that it is reviewing the commission's report but that it believes its policy respects European law.

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VIDEO: Discover advanced security features on Facebook

The current row revolves around Google's decision to pool of anonymous user data across Google services. For Google, this is a big advantage when selling online ads.

Google and other large internet groups like Facebook provide free services to consumers and earn money from selling ads that they say are more closely targeted than traditional TV or radio campaigns.

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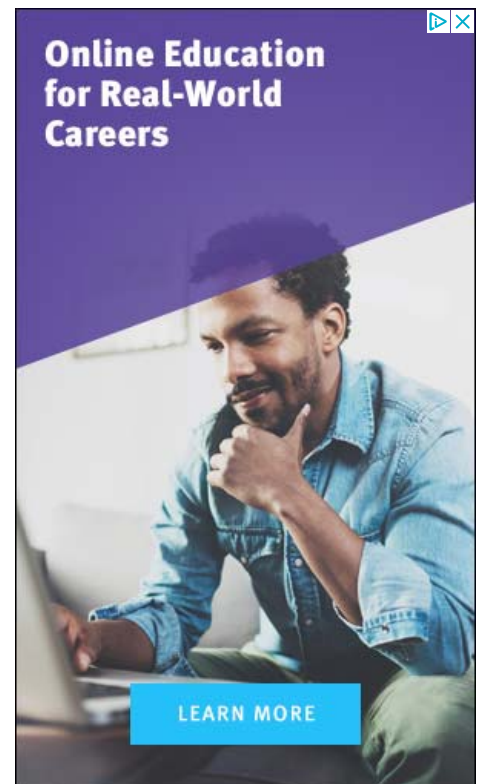
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